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AUTHOR Kirby, Kathleen Campano
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ABSTRACT

In this study, preschoolers were observed in the naturalistic preschool context to determine the development of private speech over the preschool years and contextual influences on its occurrence among 3- to 5-year-olds. Thirty-nine preschoolers were observed in their preschool classroom 4 times in 10-minute segments during free choice play activities. Each observation was coded for the child's type of play, the goal of the activity, adult presence, peer involvement, private speech, and social speech. The results showed that each preschooler emitted some type of private speech over the course of the investigation and that the total amount of private speech declined linearly as age increased. This age-related decline in private speech, with the highest incidence at age 2, suggests that Vygotsky's hypothesis of a curvilinear development trend needs to be modified. Children's changing activities during free choice periods in the preschool setting may have influenced this trend. (Author/HTH)

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ED 420 360

The Development of Private Speech Among Two- to Five-Year-Olds in the Naturalistic Preschool Setting

Kathleen Campano Kirby

Syracuse University

Poster presented at the biennial conference of the Society for Research in Child Development, Washington, DC, April, 1997. Correspondence may be sent to the author at the Department of Child and Family Studies, 202 Slocum Hall, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244-1250, USA.

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Abstract

The purpose of this investigation was to study preschoolers in the naturalistic preschool context during free choice activity periods in order to determine the development of private speech over the preschool years and contextual influences on its occurrence among two-to five-year-olds. Thirty-nine preschoolers were observed in their preschool classroom four times in ten minute segments during free choice play activities. Each observation was coded for the child's type of play, the goal of the activity, adult presence, peer involvement, private speech, and social speech. The results showed that each preschooler emitted some type of private speech over the course of the investigation and that the total amount of private speech declined linearly as age increased. An age-related decline in private speech, with the highest incidence at age two, suggests that Vygotsky's hypothesis of a curvilinear development trend needs to be modified. Children's changing activities during free choice periods in the preschool setting may have influenced this trend.

Private speech is speech which is overtly directed to a young child's self and is not spoken to another listener. According to Vygotsky (1934/1986), the development of private speech represents the young child's efforts to use language processes to guide his or her own behavior and is therefore a significant tool of cognitive development. The child uses language not only for social communication but also as a way of monitoring and instructing his or her behavior. Eventually, as private speech gains mastery over behavior, it is internalized as inner speech, or verbal thought (Vygotsky, 1934/1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, private speech can be viewed as a transitional period between external, social communication and internal, self-directed communication. It is gradually internalized as the child grows older and gains higher levels of task mastery.

At present, little is known about the development of preschoolers' private speech in naturalistic settings. Many of the studies involving preschoolers' private speech have been conducted in the laboratory, often sampling across a narrow range or considering only a single age range (Berk & Spuhl, 1995; Pellegrini, 1981; Rubin, 1979). Furthermore, the tasks used are largely problem solving table activities, which do not represent the range of young children's tasks in everyday life.

The purpose of this investigation was to study preschoolers in the naturalistic preschool context during free choice activity periods in order to determine the development of private speech over the preschool years and the contextual influences – both task and social – on its occurrence among two-to-five-year-olds.

Method

Sample

Participants were thirty-nine children attending a Midwestern preschool program: 10 two-year-olds, 10 three-year-olds, 9 four-year-olds, and 10 five-year-olds. The preschoolers who were three and older were given the vocabulary subtest of the Wechsler Preschool ad Primary Scale of Intelligence - Revised (WPPSI-R) to determine their verbal intelligence (Wechsler, 1989). The two-year-old preschoolers were given the Communication Domain of the Battelle Developmental Inventory (BDI) (Newborg, Stock, & Wnek, 1988). The children's parents completed the Hollingshead Index for Socioeconomic Status.

Procedure

The preschoolers were observed in the natural environment of their preschool classroom during free choice activities. Data were collected by observers naïve to the purpose of the study. Each preschooler was observed for four ten minute segments over the course of the investigation, with each observation occurring on a separate day. There were two observation intervals per minute, each consisting of a ten second recording interval. In all there were eighty intervals of coding for each preschooler.

Observational Categories

Type of Play

Three of these categories (functional, constructive, and fantasy) were based on Smilansky's (1968) categories of type of play. These categories were:

1. Functional play: Play involved simple repeated motoric actions.
2. Constructive play: Play involved making things with objects and materials.

3. Fantasy play: Play assumed a certain role or pretending.
4. Unoccupied play: The child watched other children but did not attempt to enter into play.
5. Transitional play: The child had left one activity and was clearly on the way to another.

Goal of Activity

1. Open-ended: Activities that had no correct or incorrect end to the task, such as pretending to be a teacher or building a house from blocks.
2. Closed-ended: Activities that had only one correct solution, such as putting a puzzle together.

Adult Presence

Adult presence was divided into three categories based on those used by Berk and Garvin (1984):

1. Directly involved: The teacher engaged interaction with the group of which the child was part.
2. Watcher-helper: The teacher watched the child or was judged close enough to hear the child's verbalizations.
3. Uninvolved: The teacher was not within hearing range of the child and was not at least minimally responsive to the child's activity.

Peer Involvement

Peer involvement was categorized into one of four categories based on Parten's (1932) description of play behavior. These categories were:

1. Solitary: The child made no attempt to interact with others but played with own toys.
2. Parallel: The child played side by side with other children rather than playing with other children.
3. Associative: The child shared as well as played with the other children.
4. Cooperative: The child played with other children in a particular goal directed activity.

Private Speech

Private speech was coded using Berk and Garvin's (1984) private speech categories. These categories were:

1. Affect Expression: Remarks or expressions of feelings and emotions which were not directed to any particular listener whether adult or peer. These expressions or feelings had no external cause but were attempts by the child to integrate an event, thought, or feeling. The following was an example of affect expression:

    B. was given a new book by his teacher and said to no one in particular, "Wow! Great!"

2. Word play and repetition: Words and sounds repeated by the child in a playful, rhythmic matter for their own sake. The following was an example of word play and repetition:

    E. went around the classroom repeating, "Put the dish in the sink; put the dish in the oven; put the dish on the table."

3. Fantasy play: Sound-effect verbalizations or role-playing situations produced for objects during play. The following was an example of fantasy play:

J. said, "Crash," when the dump truck and car collide on the floor.

4. Describing one's own activity and self-guidance: Remarks, comments, and questions made by the child about his or her own activity addressed to no particular listener. This category includes descriptions of what the child is doing at the same moment or goal-directed verbal plans for actions. Also, this category includes speech in which that child talks to himself or herself as if thinking out loud and does not expect that others will attend or understand if others are present. The following is an example of describing one's own activity and self-guidance:

S. sits down at the art table and says to herself, "I want to paint something. Let's see. I need some paper and orange paint. I want to make a pumpkin."

5. Inaudible muttering: Remarks made by the child which are too soft to be heard.

6. Other: Any comment that can not be classified into the other categories.

Social Speech

1. Peer-directed: Remarks made by the child to another peer.

2. Adult-directed: Remarks made by the child to teachers.

Results

The age groups were comparable in verbal ability and socioeconomic status. Over the course of the investigation, each preschooler emitted some type of private speech. Further, verbal ability was related to the amount of private speech emitted by the two- and three-year-olds.

As shown in Table 1, the total amount of private speech declined linearly as age increased. Word/play repetition, affect expression and fantasy play declined linearly across age

groups. The two-year-olds displayed the highest overall amount of private speech. Further, the two-year-olds used less social speech than the other age groups There was a dramatic increase in the amount of peer social speech, and total social speech, from age two to age three.

Examination of the amount of direct involvement by an adult decreased linearly as the children got older. In the classroom setting, the amount of constructive activities increased linearly with age.

For two-and three-year-olds, describing one's own activity and self-guidance and uncodable remarks were correlated with fantasy play. For four-and five-year-olds, fantasy play private speech was positively correlated with fantasy play and with associative peer involvement and negatively correlated with constructive play.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of this investigation did not support Vygotsky's curvilinear trend hypothesis that private speech increases from age three and peaks during the late preschool or early elementary school years. The two-year-olds, whose private speech in preschool was investigated in natural, free play contexts for the first time in this study, displayed the highest incidence of private speech. The five-year-olds used the fewest private speech utterances which supports Vygotsky's tenets that externalized private speech begins to become internalized during the late preschool years. The findings of this study suggest that in natural, free play context private speech peaks at age two, when children are first acquiring language and mastering their physical and social worlds. Further, two-year-olds used less social speech overall, but the more social two-year-olds used more private speech. This finding is consistent with Vygotsky's assumption that private speech has social origins and counters the Piagetian belief that preschoolers use private speech because they are nonsocial.

The increase in constructive activities in the preschool classroom between age four and five may, at least in part, explain the decline with age in private speech. Further, constructive activities were negatively associated with the use of private speech in the classroom. The age-related declines in private speech may in part be due to age-related change in activities children select for themselves or that the teachers encourage. Finally, engaging in associative play appears to promote private speech in the preschoolers. This finding is consistent with Vygotsky's hypothesis and other recent findings that socially stimulating environments foster self-directed language.

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